



State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
PO Box 500
TRENTON, NJ 08625-0500

JAMES E. MCGREEVEY
Governor

WILLIAM L. LIBRERA
Commissioner

Governor McGreevey's Early Literacy Initiative Reading Coaches: The First Year

BACKGROUND

During the spring of 2002, Governor McGreevey announced the formation of a Taskforce on Early Literacy, chaired by Dorothy Strickland of Rutgers University and Robert Copeland, Superintendent of the Piscataway Schools. The report of that taskforce, issued in the late summer of that year, provides direction for the ongoing efforts to improve literacy instruction for students in grades k-3 in the schools of New Jersey. In addition, the Governor announced a program whereby a cadre of highly-trained reading coaches would work with teachers in identified schools. The goal of the program would be to provide intensive professional development for K-3 classroom teachers with the ultimate goal that all children in New Jersey would be reading well by the end of grade 3.

The Office of Early Literacy was established in the Department of Education and was charged with implementing this proposal. Ann Lawrence, Director and Dr. Shannon Ayers and Gail Robinson, coordinators, joined the Department of Education in early June. By the end of the summer, they had interviewed, selected and provided training for the first cadre of reading coaches. On the average, each coach was assigned to work in three schools with a total of about 30 teachers.

READING COACHES

Reading coaches are highly trained educators with extensive experience in literacy education. The average reading coach holds a master's degree and has taught almost 10 years. Many of the coaches have had specialized training in teaching literacy skills. Many are certified as reading specialists or have been trained as Reading Recovery teachers. All have been actively involved in improving their own skills either through formal graduate-level course work or through active involvement in professional development opportunities. They are very familiar with the unique characteristics of teaching literacy skills to primary level children. However, most of the coaches had not presented formal staff development programs prior to becoming a coach, and all of the coaches were able to identify one or more areas of literacy education where they felt a need for more information or skills prior to the time that they began to work as coaches.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR READING COACHES

Intensive, ongoing professional development has been a key element in the Early Literacy Initiative this year. The initial study focused mainly on developing a consistent vocabulary to be used in working with teachers, and a review of a number of key literacy practices they would be presenting to teachers. The major focus, however, was on principles and skills of coaching. At various times, a number of New Jersey's leading experts on early literacy have contributed their time and expertise to assist the reading coaches in their efforts. These individuals include Dr. Dorothy Strickland of Rutgers and Dr. Leslie Morrow, also of Rutgers and the president of the International Reading Association; Dr. Fran Levin of New Jersey City University; Dr. Deborah Thompson of The College of New Jersey; and Dr. Kathy Ganske of Rowan University. The professional development activities have continued on a regular basis throughout the year by means of periodic intensive workshops conducted by the Office of Early Literacy, as well as opportunities to participate in conferences and commercially provided workshops.

GETTING STARTED IN SCHOOLS

Getting started has been one of the most difficult parts of serving as a coach this year. The coaches entered a strange environment as uninvited guests. Schools were typically wary of these strange individuals who had been appointed to work with them. Many school personnel were suspicious of the motivation and purpose of the reading coach program. It has been the job of the coaches to make themselves a valuable asset to the individual school's efforts. Nevertheless, the coaches have been able to accomplish many things and informal feedback from districts is positive.

ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Sample Activities:

- Conducting demonstration lessons, illustrating effective instructional techniques;
- Leading on-site workshops and study groups designed to meet needs identified by teachers;
- Providing in-person support, coaching as teachers practice and refine new skills;
- Making classroom visits permitting objective analysis of student needs;
- Giving specific advice on various practices of effective literacy practice;
- Building capacity among teachers and building/district leaders;
- Energizing professional discussions;
- Raising awareness of professional and instructional issues;
- Promoting effecting intra- and inter-district research and problem solving on topics of literacy instruction; and
- Providing instruction to teachers in a number of specific topics, listed below.

Sample workshop topics:

- Administering appropriate assessments and using assessment results to guide instruction

- Selection and use of appropriate reading materials; establishment of classroom libraries
- Guided reading and shared reading
- Techniques for developing reading fluency
- Writer's Workshop
- Classroom management and organization for effective instruction
- Reading inventories
- Differentiated instruction to meet the needs of individual children
- Elements of Scientifically Based Reading Research (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension)
- Motivation to read

Special activities through which some individual coaches have modeled special ways to support literacy programs:

- One coach coordinated activities with a local book store that raised sufficient funds for classroom libraries in several classes; the activity also brought children and parents together in pursuit of a literacy program.
- Another coach obtained a contribution of materials from Pizza Hut for 50 learning centers, and the company sent a special representative to support the "Book It" program in both the charter school and public school in the community.
- Coaches have formed study groups that address real problems, such as how to raise funds for needed instructional materials.

Note: As the school year ends, the coaches are collecting data that will be used in a formal evaluation of the program, yet preliminary data has been collected and analyzed to provide some indication of the impact of the program. A more complete analysis will be completed by the end of the summer.

The chart below summarizes the kinds of teacher interactions the coaches have had this year.

| ACTIVITY | NUMBER* |
|---------------------------|---------|
| Teachers involved | 690 |
| Classroom visits | 788 |
| Demonstration Lessons | 293 |
| Other teacher contacts | 2600 |
| Workshops Conducted | 150 |
| Count of students touched | 25,000+ |
| Study Groups Established | 25 |
| Teacher Conferences | 1680 |

*estimated

OBSERVATIONS

- Coaches report that they have come to feel well accepted as a resource to the schools they serve, and the overall reaction from personnel in the client schools has been positive.
- Coaches report that this has been a very demanding, yet eminently rewarding, year.
- Schools and coaches report that it doesn't seem that one year has been enough and would like to have the opportunity to continue the relationship for at least an additional year. In addition they hope to be able to continue to use their new set of skills and to continue to grow professionally.
- Many coaches have suggested that their coaching experience would be an excellent model for mentoring new teachers.
- The fact that reading coaches who are already highly trained and skilled in literacy education also require intensive on-going professional development to have a comprehensive understanding of this most important of elements within primary level education highlights the need for on-going, intensive professional development in for all of New Jersey's primary level teachers, and by extension for teachers in general.
- A great deal appears to have been accomplished by just a few coaches. A full complement of coaches will be able to extend the reach of the program in dramatic ways.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Much of the energy of the Office of Early Literacy this year has been absorbed by start-up activities, establishing policies and procedures, and building a support system for the entire program. As a result, both the coaches and the client schools have labored under frequently difficult conditions that are generally associated with new programs. Their overall good nature and willingness to bear with these difficulties is greatly appreciated by those charged with leading these efforts. The coaches have been true pioneers in a very difficult, but rewarding effort.